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“Traditional Values” and Sex Education in Russia: how opponents frame
their arguments in online media

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Abstract

This research contributes to understanding the attitudes of Russian politicians towards sex education in schools and the kind of argumentation styles they use to oppose it. The paper is based on a framing analysis of the arguments of two important opponents to sex education: Pavel Astakhov, a Russian politician and former Children's Rights Commissioner from 2009 to 2016; and Yelena Mizulina, Chairman of the State Duma Committee on Family Affairs, Women and Children since 2008, using online media sources in a ten-year period (2011-2021). The analysis finds that Astakhov's most used frames are the disapproval of children's exposure to new, different attitudes, the interference in Russian traditions by the West and the spread of a gender discourse in Russia. Mizulina focuses mainly on the unfitness of teachers since sex education should only be addressed by parents, and on the "right age" to start talking about it with young people. From the results, both politicians seem to strongly oppose comprehensive sex education (CSE), but Astakhov proposes to adopt a type of abstinence-only curriculum (AO), while Mizulina tries to completely discourage sex education of any kind for school-aged children.

Keywords Sex education, abstinence-only, comprehensive sex education, morality politics, Russia, discourse analysis, framing, children's rights, reproductive rights, traditional values

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Introduction

Sex education has been a debated issue in the West and especially in the US for many years, intensifying in the 1990s. Recently, this topic has been discussed in Russia too, as a consequence of the state's effort to define so-called "traditional values" and advocate for their adoption by society. This thesis aims to analyse the debate on sex education in Russia investigating the main frames used to advocate against it by opponents, in an attempt to understand whether politicians advocate for a type of comprehensive sex education, abstinence-only education, or for no sex education at all. Theories of framing will be used as a lens through which to analyse public statements pronounced by two opponents, Pavel Astakhov and Yelena Mizulina via online media from 2011 to 2021. In doing so, I will attempt to answer the following questions:

"Which are the main frames used to argue against sex education in Russia by conservative stakeholders?"

And

"Do these frames point to support for CSE (comprehensive sex education), AO (abstinence-only) or no sex education whatsoever?"

By seeking to study opposing arguments in the sex education debate, this analysis contributes to expanding this field of research to Russia, a geographical area with a limited history of research on this topic.

Outline

The first part of the thesis will focus on the way policies and discussions around morality and sex education changed throughout the final period of the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and Russia. In the second part, the findings of prior research in the West and Russia will be presented focusing on the main discourses. The methods chosen for this qualitative analysis will then be discussed and possible limitations of the study outlined. Subsequently, the ideal types of sex education used in the US and Europe (CSE and AO) and the frames resulted from prior research will be used as a

starting point for the analysis of Astakhov and Mizulina's arguments. Lastly, the results of the analysis will be presented together with possible paths for further research.

Background

Sex education in the Soviet Union

There is an opinion that, until the Stalin era, the Soviet Union pursued a fairly progressive policy of sexual education. Historian Den Khili states that "In historiography, one can find examples of discussions about sexual relations among famous historical figures, as well as several surveys conducted among students and young people. But this cannot be defined as a sex education policy" (Kustikova, 2016). The view of sexual relations as a natural part of the human condition, put forward by Anton Makarenko, a Stalin's appointee and one of the founders of Soviet pedagogy, led to the assumption in the 20-30s that there was no need for sex education in schools. He wrote "Book for Parents", published in 1937, where he addressed the need for a Soviet person to think about "sexual discipline" (Yur'yevna, 2019) and that sex education in school could only be "education for love" (Lipton, 2014, p. 7). This idea was supported by teachers who saw any "enlightenment" effort as "an intrusion into the most intimate spheres of human life" (Williams, 1994, p. 85). Teachers were advised to talk about the relationship between the sexes using classics (Tsitsyurskaya, 2018). Only health workers could teach students how to be clean and maintain moral purity, while doubts about sex had to be addressed exclusively by doctors and only after marriage. From this moment on, the Soviet Union entered a phase of repression of sexual policy and during the 1940s, in time of war (WWII), sex education was not discussed (Williams, 1994, p. 98).

However, during the Khrushchev thaw, from the early 1950s, the Soviet state launched a sex education campaign, causing a small shift in the official Soviet policy. Sex-education brochures were produced for young people with the aim of reducing venereal diseases, abortions and restricting their sexual activity. For example, homosexuality was labelled as a perversion and a Western phenomenon (Rustam, 2021, p. 1).

In the 1960s, two books on the topic of "sex education" were published by the Soviet psychologist Viktor Kolbanovsky. He insisted on the need for sex education for people of different ages but, at the same time, he saw sex as something to strictly limit, even in marriage. He claimed that it was necessary to avoid overexciting the "subcortical parts of the brain" as "passion" in a working person could not "prevail over reason" (Yur'yevna, 2019). The sociologist Igor Kon, one of the main experts on sexual health of the Soviet Union, began to study this topic in the 1960s. He analysed biological differences between women and men and their roles and argued that growing awareness among youth was part of a "normal sex life" (Williams, 1994, p. 84).

The question of the role of schools in educating children about sexuality started to be discussed again and the course "Fundamentals of the Soviet family and family education" was included in the school curriculum at the beginning of the 60s (Kak v SSSR zanimalis' polovym obrazovaniyem, 2017). During the 60s and 70s, the gap between the official ideology and private behaviour widened, with practice changing before public ideology (D. Bertaux, 2004, p. 113). Sex education advocates made little progress in these years, also because of the use of the word 'sex', which was a taboo in the public sphere. However, this phase was significant as discussions on sexuality started to circulate again in society.

The label of "health education" was chosen in the 70s to talk about issues related to sex and remained in use for more than a decade (Williams, 1994, p. 85). In Leningrad, for instance, students in their last years of education were taught "the dangers of casual sex, the influence of alcohol and sexual hygiene". In this context, certain types of behaviour such as being homosexual were labelled as deviant and considered a social problem. Many of these programmes did not produce the expected results because of the role morality played in limiting the dissemination of scientific knowledge. After an intense growth of the cases of syphilis from 1972, a sex education campaign was introduced in 1979 for students in the 10th and 11th grade (16-17-year-old). The responsibility for planning this 12-hour course was given to medical scientists (Lipton, 2014, p. 8). For the first time, practical measures were taken to provide young people with useful information, even if these projects were only local experiments.

But the first large scale education campaign was launched in Moscow by Leonid Brezhnev in the 1980s. The reason behind it was an alarming rise in STDs (sexually transmitted diseases) and

abortions and the label in use was still “health education” (Williams, 1994, p. 87). Some of the topics raised were “teenage hygiene”, “healthy marriage and the family” and “alcoholism and venereal disease” (Williams, 1994, p. 88). In 1982, a project called "Ethics and Psychology of Family Life" was introduced. As a rule, these lessons were taught by biology teachers to students in the 9th and 10th grades, but the number of those who were prepared for discussing this topic was low (Dolzhenko, 2017). One of the goals was to make high school students understand the importance of the family in the life of a person and society and to inform about AIDS, as the population began to see it just as a government trick to infuse fear (Dmitriyeva, 2018).

Some of the topics touched upon were family and society, love and marriage, a man’s obligations towards the family, the harmony of family relations, and mother and father in a child's life (Grebennikov & Kovin'ko, 1986). Love was recognised as the basis of marriage and the highest moral justification for sexual intercourse. The bourgeois concept of “seeking satisfaction” through sex was condemned as a man has the “right to satisfy all his needs, but [...] in truly human, not animal forms” (Grebennikov & Kovin'ko, 1986). Intimate relationships from an early age were deemed to give consequences like indifference, satiety, and boredom while providing little joy because of the absence of a marriage’s love. Therefore, a girl’s parents had to anticipate the consequences of their daughter’s frivolity as “premature sexual activity impoverishes the fullness of sexual emotions, especially in women, often making them forever frigid, reducing their possibility to have a strong marriage, making it easy for them to be adulterous in the future, and leading to the emergence of difficult family collisions and conflicts” (Grebennikov & Kovin'ko, 1986).

This course encountered resistance in society and Soviet republics took different positions: Baltic countries were in favour of it, while Central Asia opposed it because of cultural and religious differences. The results were poor due to conflicting pieces of information and a lack of coordination and finance. Since 1983, the course "Hygienic and Sexual Education" was added to the compulsory curriculum for schoolchildren starting from grade 8 (13-year-old students). The responsibilities of spouses and the formation of sexual identity were two of the themes addressed (Kak v SSSR zanimalis' polovym obrazovaniyem).

A period of greater openness began with the policy of “glasnost” introduced in the mid-80s by Mikhail Gorbachev (Williams, 1994, p. 89). This change of attitude was welcomed by public opinion, but the positions towards sex education were different throughout the country. The Ministry of Education tried to continue Brezhnev’s campaign but under the slogan “a few minutes of pleasure can cost you your life” (Williams, 1994, p. 96). The plan was developed by the Ministry of Public Health to involve parents, teachers but also medical specialists. Efforts were made to eliminate common fears so that teenagers would be able to talk about love and intimacy, while their parents were offered the possibility to attend special courses to better support them. Nevertheless, local authorities and teachers frequently tried to oppose this plan in the belief that sexual “innocence” could be enough to protect young people from premature experiences. By 1989, a Russian translation of the French "Encyclopaedia of Sexual Life" for children 7 to 9-year-old was published. It addressed the differences between boys and girls, conception and pregnancy and became one of the main sources of knowledge on sexual anatomy for a whole generation (Tsitsyurskaya, 2018). At the same time, the authorities couldn’t provide adequate sex education programmes because of a lack of resources, trained teachers, and a failure to reject “puritanical values regarding sex” (Williams, 1994, p. 91). When considering all the projects introduced throughout the 80s, we can notice that a lot of experimentation was going on at that time: experiments that will be expanded in the following decade interspersed with phases of opposition.

In 1991, the Soviet "Family Planning" association appeared in the country to conduct sexual education in schools and universities, and to teach parents and teachers how to handle these conversations. A special course for Russian schools was developed by scientists, but they were immediately stopped by the public and representatives of the church (Dmitriyeva, 2018). In February 1991, before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a survey by the All-Union Public Opinion Center asked Soviet citizens in what way they had learned about sex. Less than 13% answered that their parents had talked to them and, apart from local experiments, a real sex education programme never materialised in the Soviet period (Lipton, 2014, p. 17).

Sex education in post-Soviet Russia

After the collapse of the Soviet Union sex ceased to be bound to the private sphere as people were flooded with messages coming from foreign media. Erotic content was no longer taboo: newspaper

articles were adapted from American sources and discussed topics such as “rape, sexual violence, child abuse, group sex, and prostitution” (Lipton, 2014, s. 13). Pornography came in people’s lives and caused a profound shock and sex entered in the public sphere and Russian films.

A national programme in family planning was introduced by President Boris Yeltsin in 1991 as a way to discourage abortions and improve maternal health. In 1994, Igor Kon was recruited by the Ministry of Education to form a public expert council, which was supposed to create a sex education programme for schools. Financial assistance from the UN Population Fund was received to conduct experimental work and five "alternative programs" were created. However, opponents noticed that these projects had been made by people who had no experience in school, so they started to use this argument to protest against sex education equating it with "sexual abuse of children" (Dolzhenko, 2017).

In 1994, Yeltsin signed the federal programme “Children of Russia”, which included pilot sex education classes for pedagogical universities and advanced training institutes’ students, and a programme called "What do you know about yourself?" for general education schools (Dudkina, 2017). Yeltsin’s federal programme continued through 1995 and 1996 but, in 1997, the government formally declared that Russia did not need any sex education, so the project was interrupted (Gevorgyan, et al., 2011, p. 215). During the same period, a certain degree of openness allowed international organisations to sponsor sex education programmes and a UNESCO pilot project started in 1996 in 16 Russian regions for children aged 12-14 years old. It provoked a public scandal defined as “moral panic” by the sociologist Igor Kon (Lipton, 2014, p. 25). The project was quickly shut down and this was the first incidence of pushback from the government. Narratives started to circulate identifying children as the risk object who could even be led to alcoholism and drug addiction because of these initiatives. This phase is of extreme importance for our analysis as, for the first time, Russia tried to push back Western projects and to highlight cultural differences. We are talking about a controversial period with attempts to introduce sex education projects on a large scale on one side, but with debates on the utility of such educational efforts on the other.

Despite various experiments, by the 2000s Russia still did not have a formal sex education programme and a worrying increase of HIV cases forced the government to introduce prevention

programmes; however, these taught abstinence before marriage and family values. Children were conceived by sex education opponents as “pure and innocent both in a moral and physical sense” and sex education pilot projects were blamed for leading “turmoil in their souls” (Meylakhs, 2011, p. 240). Igor Kon called this period a “sexual counter-revolution”, result of “the growth of imperial ambitions, the curtailment of democratic freedoms and the revival of authoritarianism, as well as the clericalization of state power and education” (Dolzhenko, 2017). By the mid-2000s media began to bypass the topic of sex again, and headlines about sex disappeared from many youth magazines or became less explicit (Tsitsyurskaya, 2018). Some schools tried to implement local courses between 2000 and 2010 and, according to a 2009 study by the Ministry of Health, 90% of all 15-24-year-olds said they had received at least one school lesson on sex education, 34% stated that they had received information from a parent and 20% from a friend (Lipton, 2014, p. 26).

Sex education after the conservative turn (2012)

Under Putin’s government, a national sex education programme has not been adopted even if pilot projects are present in Russia, sometimes approved by the Ministry of Education. A widespread belief is that the government does not want to introduce sex education to increase Russia’s birth rate (Anatoly Vishnevsky, 2017, p. 27). In 2013, the Minister of Education and Science Dmitry Livanov proposed to discuss again the issue of sex education but without success (Dolzhenko, 2017). As part of a turn towards “traditional values”, not only politicians but also conservative parents’ rights organizations have started advocating against sex education. According to them, international child rights standards caused “a disruption of child-parent relations, of social ties and of the entire Russian way of life” (Fábián & Bekiesza-Korolczuk, 2017, p. 46).

In 2015, for example, a protest erupted in Tyumen, one of the largest cities of the Ural region. The trigger was the introduction of a local sex education project since this area was among the top ten with rising rates of HIV infection in Russia. This project infuriated the Tyumen Parents' Committee that started complaining about the participation of people without parenting experience in a poll that had been conducted for the plan to be approved (Pashchenko, 2018). They stated that such activities promoted early sexual life and that Tyumen was being turned into “a testing ground for the corruption of children and young people” (Zakurdayeva, 2018). These are all indicators of the

current status of sex education in Russia and the reason why the analysis will focus precisely on opponents' arguments.

A survey conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center in 2018 showed that 61% of Russian would like to introduce sex education at school mainly to discuss morality aspects, strengthen a sense of responsibility in adolescents, and provide information on how to prevent STDs and pregnancy (Savitskaya, 2018). The Institute of Developmental Physiology of the Russian Academy of Sciences has revealed that 80% of Russian parents believe that only a gynaecologist or teacher can talk about these topics (Dmitriyeva, 2018). According to another study conducted in 2020 by telemedicine service Doctor Near, 74.7% of the respondents supported the idea of introducing sex education in schools. The sample was formed of 4.2 thousand people living in Russian cities with more than one million inhabitants. Only 7.3% of them claimed that "sex education" should be conducted at home (Polyakova, 2020). But providing "direct instruction about sexual behaviour to children in public secondary schools" remains forbidden (Bolshakova Maria, 2020, p. 568). This can be explained by the fact that conservatism has been recently recognised as a positive political and social concept in Russia and this is the environment in which the politicians that will be analysed are positioned (Muravyeva, 2014, p. 625).

Prior Research

The West

The US

Sex education has a long history of research in the US. It started in the 1960s and the main division is that between supporters of abstinence-only education (AO) and comprehensive sex education (CSE) (Kramer, 2019, p. 490). The debate has been intense especially since the 1990s. AO in schools belongs to the conservative category and it spread throughout the US in the 90s as a government reaction to the growth of adolescent sex and teen pregnancy (Greslé-Favier, 2013, p. 713). AO has been described as "the only certain way to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancy, STDs and other health problems" (John S. Santelli, 2017, p. 276). An alternative is abstinence-plus, a curriculum including more information than AO, but which tend to be rather conservative (Thoreson, p. 5). Instead, CSE challenges "the use of scare tactics and the silence of existing

school-based sex education around issues such as pleasure and desire” (Maloney, 2017, p. 152). It provides students with information on sexual and reproductive health and HIV prevention, gender equality, women’s empowerment, human rights, physical and psychological development, and the balance of power in a relationship. CSE has been promoted by the United Nations, often referring to the Netherlands as a role model (Krebbekx, 2020, p. 2).

Europe

In Scandinavia and in particular, in Sweden, the idea that the conduction of educational work at school has a profound impact on society gained traction from the 1950s. In 1955, Sweden was the first country to introduce sex education in schools and Germany followed in the 1970s introducing a “holistic” programme (Barbara Rothmüller, 2020, p. 5). This educational material started to be exported all over the world in the belief that it may serve to reduce the spread of AIDS among young people but also gender violence and abortions. The Netherlands, Germany and France provide courses starting when a child is 6 years old and often offer free contraceptives at specialised youth clinics (Bolshakova Maria, 2020, p. 578).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, some Eastern European countries imported teaching material from Scandinavia and Germany but revised them extensively. Since the end of the XX century, countries with an established tradition of CSE have faced increasing criticism of right-wing groups and conservative parents (Barbara Rothmüller, 2020, p. 6). In Poland, for example, the Catholic church pushed to restrict abortions, and to orient sex education towards the family and far from the idea of pleasure. In 2009, in some Eastern European countries, the term “Family Life Education” was still used instead of “sex education” because of the influence of national ideologies (Parker, Wellings, & Lazarus, 2009, p. 240).

Ideal types of Sex Education

CSE and AO education will be used as ideal types of sex education in this analysis as they are the most used types internationally. The International Planned Parenthood Federation, the largest non-governmental organization in the field of sexual and reproductive health has regulated that a CSE curriculum:

- presents abstinence as an option while informing about human sexuality in a broad way, including contraception and techniques to avoid the contraction of STDs
- aims to reduce the number of abortions
- encourage discussions on emotions preparing students to discuss such a “sensitive topic” freely
- helps students to develop life skills such as critical thinking, negotiation, and self-development skills
- helps students to deal with consent, violence, and pedophilia
- Decreases sexual illiteracy dispelling myths (Parker, Wellings, & Lazarus, 2009, p. 227)

According to the US Social Security Act of 1996, AO is a curriculum which:

- has as its exclusive purpose to teach the social, psychological, and health gains to be realized by abstaining from sexual activity
- teaches that abstinence from sexual activity outside marriage is the expected standard for all school-aged children
- teaches that abstinence from sexual activity is the only certain way to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancy, STDs, and other associated health problems
- teaches that a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity
- teaches that sexual activity outside the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects
- teaches that bearing children out-of-wedlock is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the parents, and society
- teaches young people how to reject sexual advances and how alcohol and drug use increases vulnerability to sexual advances
- teaches the importance of attaining self-sufficiency before engaging in sexual activity (Compilation of The Social Security Laws, Social Security Administration)

CSE and AO’s definitions will be of primary importance to interpret the politicians’ arguments and understand which type of sex education they advocate for.

In Russia

Among the research conducted on sex education in Russia, D. Rabinovitsch compares discourse on CSE in two Russian media outlets (Ria News and Meduza) between 2018 and 2020. The goal was to better understand Russia's governmental and oppositional rhetoric on the issue and the conclusion was that in Russia "there was no strong opposition or advocacy for sex education like there was after the collapse of the Soviet Union" (Rabinovitsch, 2020, p. 44). Rabinovitsch's findings will be a model to extend research on sex education using additional media sources.

The attitudes towards the introduction of sex education in schools located in Altai Krai, Volgograd Oblast, and Moscow in 2004-2005 were analysed by R. Gevorgyan. The result was that the main stakeholders (HIV Committee members, government officials and non-governmental organisation representatives) showed little opposition to sex education and that 91% of them emphasised that the programme was important "for a child's personal development, public health, STDs and HIV/AIDS control, and pregnancy planning" (Gevorgyan, et al., 2011, p. 213). Gevorgyan found that some feared sex education could corrupt society therefore only parents could discuss it with children, keeping in mind cultural and regional differences. UNICEF sex education programmes were considered "rude" and ill-suited from an ethical point of view as, according to faith-based organisations, they are "in contradiction to the moral norms of our society, against our mentality [...] against Orthodox traditions" (Gevorgyan, et al., 2011, p. 220). Moreover, uncertainties regarding the quality of the curriculum, the "right" age to start discussing sexuality and the teaching methods and teachers' qualifications were described. These findings, coming from people occupying different positions in society, can point to arguments that may be used by the politicians chosen for the analysis.

P. Meylakhs' analysis highlights a missing piece in the Russian anti-sex education narrative: the "Christian concept of human as naturally prone to sin, who can only be held at bay by the system of prohibitions and silencing" (Meylakhs, 2011, p. 247). He claimed that it would be oversimplifying to consider debates on sex education in Russia as "a battle of 'enlightened rationality' against 'dark irrationality'" and identifies the presence in Russia of a specific narrative with its objects of risk (children), a solution to risk reduction and the type of society this solution presupposes. At the micro-level, other risks that sex education could provoke are the onset of

sexual activity, “sexual perversions”, psychiatric diseases, and aggression; while at the macro-level, the moral decline of the society and depopulation provoked by geopolitical enemies, usually from Western countries (Meylakhs, 2011, p. 249). Meylakhs’ analysis highlights that debates on sex education are connected not only to specific concerns about the consequences on children’s wellbeing, but also to the existence of narratives bringing up external enemies that supposedly use sex education to “destroy Russia”.

L. Jarkovska highlights discourses focusing on the negative aspects of gender theories and the role sex education supposedly plays in spreading them in Russia. She explains how these discourses are used to build a nationalist ideology, part of the rising worldwide populism (Jarkovska, 2019, p. 141). The concept of gender, defined as the “tasks, functions and roles assigned by society to women and men in their public and private life”, has indeed acquired a negative connotation in Russian (SDC, 2003, p. 4). An example of such tendency is the increasingly widespread neologism ‘Gayropa’, constructed to “demasculinise Europe, defining homosexuality as the essence of the European postmodern lifestyle” (Jarkovska, 2019, p. 142). Jarkovska’s contribution is important because she brings up a new frame, that about the fear that Russian citizens might embrace western gender theories as a consequence of the conduction of sex education. She explains that, since sex education has specific implications for private lives and children’s integrity, it has “sufficient emotional potential to become a tool for mobilising the masses” and that is the reason why politicians might try to limit it. (Jarkovska, 2019, p. 141)

It is possible to group the arguments from prior research into the following categories:

1. Disapproval of children’s exposure to new, different attitudes

One opinion is that children do not need sex education as the previous generations have been able to do without it. Russia is a society based on morals that can have a great impact on society even if they are not necessarily connected to religion. Sometimes religious people, but not only, tend to disapprove of their children being exposed to different attitudes from their own claiming that it is up to a child’s parents to discuss these topics privately (Maloney, 2017, p. 154). In these settings, AO is likely to be the dominant approach (Kramer, 2019, p. 507).

2. Unfitness of teachers in Russia

Religious ideologies can affect the way parents decide to communicate with children, and whether they believe they should be taught by others. Many think it is too difficult for the teachers to address sex education, an argument that came up from research conducted in three Russian regions. Most of the teachers are middle to old-aged and lack qualifications while there is a scarce availability of guidelines and manuals (Gevorgyan, et al., 2011, p. 220-223).

3. Interference in Russian traditions by the West

Sex education is frequently perceived as interference in Russian traditions coming from abroad, usually from the West, to “destroy Russia” and teach teenagers “not how to create a family and raise children but how to avoid pregnancy and get pleasure from copulation” (Meylakhs, 2011, p. 249). To distinguish Russia’s “traditional values” from European ones an image of “decadent West” has been created by the Church and politicians (Fábián & Bekiesza-Korolczuk, 2017, p. 199). This leads to the spread of a “foreign agent” argument that evolved from the introduction in 2012, of laws on “foreign agents” obliging all non-governmental organisations that engage in political activities and receive funds from abroad to register as “foreign agents” (Laine & Silvan, 2021, p. 1).

4. Spread of a gender discourse

Some are worried that sex education will spread Western gender theories in Russia and even cause changes in children’s sexual orientation. For this reason, sex education is seen as a danger, a threat to the nation and society.

5. “Right age” to teach sex education

Another problem is related to defining the “right age” to start educating children about sexuality to avoid it being more of a danger than an important toolbox in children’s life. From Gevorgyan’s analysis, no consensus was found, with suggestions ranging from 5 to 14 years old (Gevorgyan, et al., 2011, p. 223). A common idea is that teenagers “should be discussing love and family life instead, as sex education might fuel children’s interest in sexual relations” (Gevorgyan, et al., 2011, p. 213).

Theories

Framing analysis is the method chosen to shed light on the Russian case. This is “a constructivist approach to examine news discourse with the primary focus on conceptualizing news texts into empirically operationalizable dimensions” (Kosicki, 2010, p. 1). The arguments taken up by stakeholders reflect their identity and the function of the environment in which they live in the production of conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions. Therefore, framing encompasses “a situation’s external structures of rules and norms along with individuals’ behaviour, but not strictly, because individuals, by the way of interpreting frameworks, are prone to put aspects of a situation into a certain light” (D'Angelo, 2018, p. 24). Different beliefs can also be based on age, socio-cultural family backgrounds and experiences.

Methodology

Based on the literature review, I was inspired to analyze the debate on sex education in Russia in the last decade and in particular the arguments used by the most prominent opponents. The aim is to investigate their position in the context of the Russian social and political environment, identifying their main arguments relying on framing, a fundamental component of the policymaking process used to shape public opinion and to build a foundation for public discourse. In the process of framing, some perspectives are discarded, while others are considered and a narrative that connects them highlighted to encourage a certain interpretation (Kramer, 2019, p. 492). For instance, AO has often been framed with religious or moral frames while a human rights frame might be used to explain why teenagers should be allowed to make their own autonomous decisions on their sexual life.

This study adopts a deductive approach by attempting to verify whether the arguments that came up in prior research are present in the Russian context. An inductive approach will be used in case evidence of new arguments is found. This analysis is meant to be mainly qualitative, focusing on the way arguments are structured but will contain some quantitative measurements too, to better illustrate when and how frequently these arguments are brought up.

Selection of speakers

The politicians selected are Pavel Astakhov, former Children's Rights Commissioner for the President of the Russian Federation; and Yelena Mizulina, current Chairman of the State Duma Committee on Family Affairs, Women and Children. Due to the limited time and scale of this project, only opponents of sex education have been considered.

The main contributions from Astakhov date back to the time he was Children's Rights Commissioner, from 2009 to 2016. A petition asking to remove Astakhov from office was already signed in 2015, after he spoke in defence of a wedding of a 47-year-old Chechen man with a 17-year-old girl, contravening Russian laws on polygamy and legal age of adulthood. He claimed that "In the Caucasus, emancipation and puberty occur earlier, let's not be hypocrites. There are places where women are already shrivelled at the age of 27" (Astakhov: na Kavkaze ran'she proiskhodit polovoye sozrevaniye, 2015). He was therefore accused of evading "the responsibility to protect a minor from violence and allow himself to make offensive remarks about women" (Telekanal BBC: Sotni rossiyanok «smorshchilis'» v otvet na skandal'noye zayavleniye Pavla Astakhova, 2015). Later he added that people "should not be worried about early marriages... but about the early sex life of teenagers" (Walker, 2015). In 2016 he left his job shortly after other scandals and accusations of being an opportunist and a publicity seeker.

Yelena Mizulina has been defined by Russian media as "the main fighter for moral principles, morality and sexual education for the sake of young people's generation" (Borodina, 2013). She tried to make the Orthodox Church the core of Russian cultural identity and, in 2013, she stated that "her liberal views began to change after she started to study family relationships and traditional values" (Mostovshchikov, 2015).

She is well known for her law banning "propaganda of homosexuality" in the presence of minors, which was signed on 29th June 2013, and the attempt to ban various LGBT events, projects, and organisations under the pretext of protecting children (Loriga, 2020, p. 2). In her fight for "morality", she also argues that she "does not consider it crazy if nonbiological adopted children are taken away from same-sex families and returned to orphanages" (Borodina, 2013). However, her position is sometimes unclear such as when, in 2013, she stated: "Now in Russia it is even

possible to hold a gay pride parade" and concluded that "the new "anti-gay law" could even improve Russians attitude towards gay people [...] (since) only events in the presence of children are illegal" (Sharapova, 2013). During a meeting with the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in Geneva in which Mizulina took part, the Russian delegation stated that "treatment for (homosexual) children can only be carried out with parental consent" showing that homosexuality is often still considered a pathology in Russia. Mizulina has also been active in prohibiting the adoption of Russian children by American "persons in a marriage union between people of the same sex registered in a state where such a union is allowed, as well as citizens of such states that are not married" (Russian Duma backs adoption ban on foreign gay couples, 2013).

Moreover, in 2017 she supported a bill to decriminalise domestic violence first assaults which cause "less serious injuries" in an attempt to defend parents who applied "light educational measures" to a child, affirming that "now for a spank to your own child you can be punished more severely than for a fight with a stranger on the street" (Russia: Anger at move to soften domestic violence law, 2017). According to her, this law was necessary to support the Russian traditional family culture, in which parent-child relations are built on the authority of the parents.

Lastly, she has been trying to exclude termination of pregnancy from the compulsory health insurance system and depriving women of the right to abortion claiming that "married women will need permission from their husbands to perform an abortion, and underage girls will need permission from their parents" since "abortion is a threat to the national security of Russia" (Shiryayev, 2018).

Pavel Astakhov and Yelena Mizulina have been chosen because they are among the most known personalities that took part in meetings and discussions at an international level, such as with the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. Taking a stance on sex education and proposing their solutions they have provoked reactions also in Europe and in the international press.

Selection of materials and delimitations

The top 10 daily and online newspapers according to the website "*Medialogia*", a Russian company that monitors and analyses media, will be examined for each year within a 10-year period (2011-2021). The online news portals chosen are Rbc.ru, Russian.rt.com, Lenta.ru, Gazeta.ru,

Life.ru, M24.ru, Fontanka.ru, Vesti.ru, Slon.ru, Inosmi.ru; while the daily newspapers (online edition) are Izvestia, Kommersant, Rossiyskaya Gazeta, Komsomolskaya Pravda, Vedomosti, Moskovski Komsomolets, Parlamentskaya gazeta, Novaya Gazeta, Argumenti i Fakti and Gazeta RBK. Moreover, the websites of the news agencies Tass, Ria Novosti, and Interfaks are considered. It should be noted that the ratings for the years 2011-2012 and 2013 were not available on “*Medialogia*” as their publication started in 2014, but it has been assumed that they were relevant even in the years before (Federal'nyye SMI: 2014; Federal'nyye SMI: 2015; Federal'nyye SMI: 2016; Federal'nyye SMI: 2017; Federal'nyye SMI: 2018; Federal'nyye SMI: 2019; Federal'nyye SMI: 2020; Reytingi - TOP-10 SMI, 2021).

The combinations of keywords for the selection of articles will be “Pavel Astakhov”, “Yelena Mizulina” and the various iterations of “sex education” in Russian (“*polovoye vospitaniye*” “*polovoye prosveshcheniye*” “*seksual'noye vospitaniye*”, and “*seksual'noye prosveshcheniye*”). The word “sex” can be translated in two different ways in Russia: “*pol*”, used to name males or females in a biological sense and “*seks*”, which has to do with sexual activity and has had in the past a pejorative connotation. From these nouns, we obtain two different adjectives with a slightly different meaning in this context. The word “*vospitaniye*” has to do with the upbringing of children, while the word “*prosveshcheniye*” with enlightenment (Rabinovitsch, 2020, p. 20). However, in the Russian context, these combinations are frequently used interchangeably so they will all be considered to create the sample. Using the word combinations presented above, 29 articles have been found featuring Astakhov and 26 featuring Mizulina. The following chart represents the data set and the distribution of articles in the ten years considered.

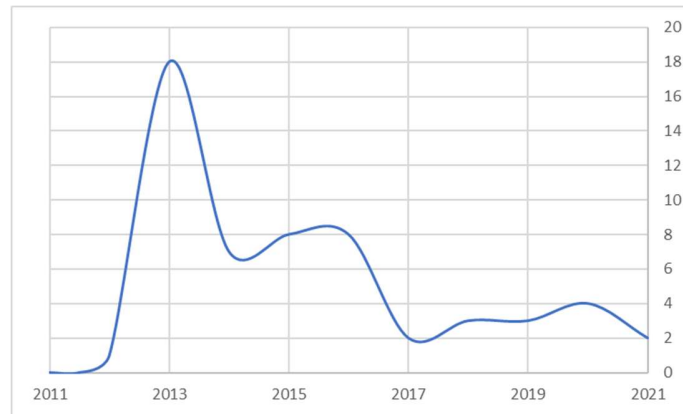


Figure 1 Number of articles on sex education featuring Astakhov and/or Mizulina, 2011-2021

At the beginning of 2011, the contribution in the debate on sex education of the stakeholders considered was almost non-existent. In 2013 however, the debate quickly peaked and later halved in 2014-15. From 2017 to 2021 the contributions have stabilized on a range between 10 and 20% of 2013's peak.

Astakhov and Mizulina's participation in debates in the 10-year period is inevitably connected to the duration of their mandates but we can note that the highest peak has been reached in 2013. One reason might be that in 2013 a law on the ban of distribution to minors of information and materials about non-traditional sexual relations, widely known as the "gay propaganda law" came into force (Federal'nyy zakon ot 29 iyunya 2013 g. N 135-FZ g. Moskva "O vnesenii izmeneniy v stat'yu 5 Federal'nogo zakona "O zashchite detey ot informatsii, prichinyayushchey vred ikh zdorov'yu i razvitiyu" i otdel'nyye zakonodatel'nyye akty Rossiyskoy Federatsii v, 2013). The hostile environment that followed the introduction of this law might have had an impact on how frequently sex education has been discussed and this is highlighted by the decreasing trend. Another complication might derive from the impossibility to write openly about sex education because of it being considered a taboo in society, part of a "tradition of silence" (Williams, 1994, p. 93). Furthermore, the limited attempts to introduce sex education were made under general labels such as that of "health education" during the Soviet period and until the 1980s. For this reason, there might be more articles discussing this topic but without using explicit words such as "sex education".

Expectations and hypotheses

Based on prior research of sex education debates it is possible to advance some hypotheses on the arguments that these public figures will probably make regarding different types of sex education or whether or not it should be discussed in schools.

Hypothesis 1: From the prior research conducted, a frame that will probably be employed by the politicians is that about the “disapproval of children’s exposure to new, different attitudes”. Children will be presented as the objects of risk and the solution proposed could be to avoid any change and discourage discussion on the topic (Meylakhs, 2011, p. 249). The presence of geopolitical enemies and the frame of “Interference in Russian traditions by the West” is also likely to be used, showing the distance between Russian “traditional values” and Western ones as suggested by K. Fábíán (Fábíán & Bekiesza-Korolczuk, 2017).

Hypothesis 2: Another hypothesis is that these politicians will never advocate for comprehensive sex education (CSE), while they might sometimes present abstinence-only education (AO) as a viable solution.

Findings

The articles found following the criteria presented in the methodology referring to Astakhov were 29, while 16 of them were considered relevant for this study. Those referring to Mizulina were 26, among which the relevant ones were 8. No articles have been found referring to both Astakhov and Mizulina in the selected sample, even if they took part in the same discussions and events related to children’s right and sex education. Astakhov was cited more times than Mizulina, and the relevant articles featuring him were twice as much the number of Mizulina’s.

Pavel Astakhov

“They ask me, when will Russia have sex enlightenment? I reply never.” - Pavel Astakhov (Shestakov, 2018).

With this statement, Pavel Astakhov argues that he is opposed to any sex education among children. However, his position is not always stable in the media analysed as he has also stated that “The need for sex education for children is undeniable” (P. Astakhov: *Luchsheye polovoye vospitaniye - eto russkaya literatura*, 2013). What he probably meant was, however, that the best option was to adopt an AO approach, taking inspiration from established courses such as "the already mentioned American program 'Education and abstinence' " (P. Astakhov: *Luchsheye polovoye vospitaniye - eto russkaya literatura*, 2013). He argues that “‘Abstinence Education’ is a deterrent, explaining these phenomena, but without promoting early sexual activity - it warns children against making such mistakes, which are sometimes irreversible" (Astakhov *vystupayet protiv seks-prosveta: russkaya literatura - luchshiy metodicheskiy material dlya polovogo vospitaniya*, 2013).

Disapproval of children’s exposure to new, different attitudes

This frame was the most used by Astakhov (10 times). He insists that sex education for children goes against “traditional values” and can have an impact on children’s morale and mental health. As an alternative he proposes to make children read classics, where love and relations reflect “traditional values” like family and love, omitting any sexual component. He states that "... everything is there: about love and the relationship between the sexes. And the school should educate children to be chaste, in the spirit of understanding of family values " (Astakhov *lishil shkol'nikov prava na seksprosvet*, 2014).

One example that was unforeseen from prior research is the proposal to reintroduce the Soviet course on "Ethics and Psychology of Family Life" to supposedly prevent the sexual abuse of minors. He claims that "There was nothing wrong with them (these courses). Once a month a person came to talk about reproductive health." (Astakhov *obespokoyen vozmozhnym vvedeniyem urokov polovogo prosveshcheniya*, 2013). As described in the background, this is a programme developed in the Soviet Union and portrayed as acceptable as it reflects the Russian cultural background by focusing on the importance of the family and on love as the moral justification for sexual intercourse.

Astakhov’s arguments heavily rely on Russia’s past as the model to follow while arguing for AO. He claims that "Children need to be taught how to avoid premature sexual intercourse, maintain

chastity, build a family correctly, prepare themselves to perform the most important social functions of being a mother and a father in their future family life, have a responsible attitude towards family, marriage, birth and upbringing of children." (Pavel Astakhov predupredil ministra obrazovaniya ob opasnosti seksual'nogo vospitaniya shkol'nikov, 2013). He also acknowledged that, in today's world, children can learn about sex outside of school so that "Parents should keep a close eye on their offspring and be ready to answer questions." Astakhov refers to the Soviet period saying that young people could be provided with explanations on marital intimate relationships in appropriate counselling centres, but only after marriage (Walker, 2013). Therefore, the focus is shifted from contraception to the prevention of any sexual contact and an AO approach is promoted.

Interference in Russian traditions by the West

The Ombudsman expresses difficulties when working with European colleagues because of different positions on sex education for children. He states that "These documents provide guidance on early sex education for children. [...] following them will be contrary to the norms of morality, ethics, as well as the traditions of Russia" (Astakhov lishil shkol'nikov prava na seksprosvet, 2014). Astakhov's opinion is that the Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse has been used by sex education advocates in a way that contradicts Russian norms of morality and traditions. This interpretation is quite surprising as Russia officially ratified this treaty in May 2013 and committed to "take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that information for children on the dangers of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse is included in primary and secondary school curricula, as well as information on how to protect themselves, adapted to their developing abilities" (Pavel Astakhov predupredil ministra obrazovaniya ob opasnosti seksual'nogo vospitaniya shkol'nikov, 2013).

On one occasion he goes as far as to claim that following international conventions would "promote the expansion of the practice of involving minors into various forms of sexual exploitation" (Pavel Astakhov predupredil ministra obrazovaniya ob opasnosti seksual'nogo vospitaniya shkol'nikov, 2013). In this way, he seems to advocate against CSE. Moreover, being a lawyer, he frequently cites various laws to support his arguments. He describes sex education for children as "...an activity that should be prohibited, first of all, from the point of view of the law on basic guarantees of the rights of the child, because it is unacceptable to do things that corrupt

the child and, of course, from the point of view of the law on the protection of children from harmful information" (P. Astakhov: *Luchsheye polovoye vospitaniye - eto russkaya literatura*, 2013).

This is a strong weapon as, if desired, any information given to minors about sex can be interpreted as a violation of the aforementioned law "On the Protection of Children from Information Harmful to Their Health and Development" that explicitly prohibits portraying and describing sexual behaviour to children under the age of 16 (Shestakov, 2018). This frame of an "interference from the West" is the third most used frame by Astakhov.

Spread of a gender discourse

Other factors that concern Astakhov are gender theories and homosexual relationships. This frame of a "gender discourse" is used 6 times by the politician. He talks about the moral decay of the West and presents Russia as a country where heterosexuality is the only expected orientation. He proposes to legislatively prohibit gender education of children, based on the law "On the protection of children from information that is harmful to their health and development" and stating that it is necessary to "legally and forever prohibit gender education of children" (Dmitriyeva, 2018). However, he recognises the necessity to bring up discussions about gender with children stating that "every parent should ask themselves if they are ready to tell their child about this (homosexual relationships), about what exists in neighbouring countries" (Astakhov *schitayet luchshim polovym vospitaniyem russkuyu literaturu*, 2013). Referring to "neighbouring countries", he puts Russia and Western countries against each other and acts like non-traditional sexual orientation do not even exist in Russia. Astakhov emphasises the role of parents in explaining to their children why non-traditional families are wrong. However, parents are left free to decide when and whether to bring up this conversation. Again, he argues against CSE and does not seem to approve an AO curriculum either.

Unfitness of teachers in Russia

Astakhov does not only refer to the unfitness of teachers in schools as a reason to prohibit sex education, but he does not accept specialists either. He declares he is "very glad that the Ministry of Education refused to introduce sex education projects because today it is very dangerous to

allow such specialists to approach children" (Astakhov schitayet luchshim polovym vospitaniyem russkuyu literaturu, 2013).

However, in 2015, discussing the introduction of a sex education project conducted in Tyumen, Astakhov expressed concern not about the topic itself, but about the way it was taught. He stressed that he would have organized a meeting of teachers, parents and the leadership of the regional department of education to discuss episodes of "child molestation", and to find out "how delicate the teacher was, how much she did not deviate from the program, which was approved by the federal ministry" (Pashchenko, 2018).

"Right age" to teach sex education

Astakhov wants to protect children from getting to know certain information prematurely claiming that "Information presented to children prematurely and incorrectly about the intimate aspects of a person's life can take the form of propaganda for debauchery, disorderly lifestyle and cause significant harm to the physical, moral and mental health of children, to make them more vulnerable to attacks on their sexual integrity" (Astakhov obespokoyen vozmozhnym vvedeniyem urokov polovogo prosveshcheniya, 2013). According to him, sex education should not start from preschool age as suggested by international conventions, and instead "it is worth postponing the introduction of the subject of sex education in the school curriculum" (Astakhov: polovoye vospitaniye shkol'nikov grozit propagandoy razvrata, 2013). However he argues that the Soviet course "Ethics and Psychology of Family Life" could benefit children after the age of 15-16 (Astakhov vystupayet protiv seks-prosveta: russkaya literatura - luchshiy metodicheskiy material dlya polovogo vospitaniya, 2013) and that educational efforts should primarily be oriented towards adults who "need to be explained what sexual exploitation and abuse of children's rights in this area are" (Pavel Astakhov: luchshey polovoye vospitaniye - russkaya literatura, 2013).

Even if Astakhov repeated multiple times that sex education will never be introduced in Russia and that he is completely against it, there are some cases in which he explains that it should only be postponed to a moment when children are old enough not to be 'corrupted'. Age seems to be the most important factor to consider to allow abstinence-only sex education. Moreover, it seems that while justifying the impropriety of introducing such a topic in schools, he had CSE in mind and not sex education in general. This is evident by his proposal to draw from the USSR's course

on "Ethics and Psychology of Family Life". We could state that Astakhov's position lies close to the American AO approach, which considers abstinence as the expected standard for young people, claiming that it is the only way to support the institution of marriage and family and prevent any psychological damage while contributing to society's well-being. To conclude, here Astakhov is entirely against CSE and for AO education under certain conditions: namely, students should be 15 years and older.

Yelena Mizulina

Disapproval of children's exposure to new, different attitudes

According to Mizulina, people have always known how to protect themselves from pregnancy and sexual diseases. Therefore, she does not think sex education is needed in society. A discourse about a "parenting crisis" is brought up, to explain why there are some parents who want their children to learn about sexuality at school. They act in an attempt to avoid such discussions at home, and this is a bad decision both for the well-being of the family and for the school curriculum that becomes too heavy (Larina, 2013). Mizulina strongly advocates for sex to remain taboo in society while encouraging marginal discussions inside the family if needed and in case children cannot acquire enough information on their own.

Interference in Russian traditions by the West

Mizulina does not usually focus on international actors in her arguments. However, she tends to take more extreme positions when talking about the way Russian society might be ruined by Western ideas like recognising specific rights to the LGBT community or equal rights and opportunities for both men and women. In these circumstances, she claimed that such ideas are a "threat to traditional family values" («Pravovaya baza dlya izvrashcheniy» Eti zakony mogli zashchitit' rossiyskikh zhenshchin. Pochemu ikh ne prinyali? , 2019).

Spread of a gender discourse

From the analysis, it is evident that there is a problem with the definitions of "gender" and "feminism" in Russia. These concepts are perceived as dangerous as they question patriarchal hierarchy where masculinity is valued over femininity. For this reason, sex and gender education should be prohibited in Russia (Sperling, 2020). Talking about women studying and working

Mizulina concludes that “This is not a woman's business at all. Women's business is to give birth and raise children, and leave science and education to men. We need healthy Orthodox girls, not pale feminist nerds” (Shiryayev, 2018).

Unfitness of teachers in Russia

Mizulina does not talk specifically about schoolteachers being ill-suited to provide sex education, but she claims that only parents can give them the necessary information. She explains that "There are no sex education lessons in our schools, I am an opponent of them too. Parents should explain all of this to their child" (Sharapova, 2013).

“Right age” to teach sex education

This frame is the most frequently used by Mizulina. She talks about her decision to advocate for another bill that would increase the age limit for entering into sexual relations claiming that "modern adolescents are not at all ready to have sexual relations before the age of 18" (Borodina, 2013). In 2014, Mizulina proposed to punish not only propaganda on same-sex relations among minors but even the “imposition of information on minors about the priority of sexual relations” (Volchek, 2014).

Contrary to Astakhov, Mizulina tries to completely discourage sex education for school-aged children regardless of age. Overall, the arguments used, and the preferred types of sex education are the following:

Arguments used

Frames	Pavel Astakhov	Elena Mizulina	Number of mentions Astakhov	Number of mentions Mizulina
Disapproval of children's exposure to new different attitudes	yes	yes	10	1
Interference in Russian traditions by the West	yes	no	5	0
Spread of a gender discourse	yes	yes	6	1
Unfitness of teachers in Russia	yes	yes	4	2
"Right age" to teach sex education	yes	yes	1	4
References to Western theories	yes	no	1	0

Table 1 - Arguments used by Astakhov and Mizulina and number of mentions

Preferred model of sex education

Pavel Astakhov	Elena Mizulina
AO, based on the Soviet course "Ethics and Psychology of Family Life"	None

Table 2 - Preferred model of sex education by Astakhov and Mizulina

Discussion

The first frame tested was "disapproval of children's exposure to new different attitudes" and it was the most used by Astakhov (10 times) who insists that sex education for children can have an impact on their wellbeing. Therefore, they should rely only on Russian literature to get information about family and love, but notions about sexuality should be strictly limited. Explanations on intimate relationships could be provided in appropriate counselling centres, but only after marriage (Walker, 2013). Mizulina takes a more extreme position arguing that sex education is not needed

in society because people have always been able to do without it, even when sex was completely taboo.

The frame “Interference in Russian traditions by the West” was used extensively by Astakhov but not by Mizulina. Astakhov relies mainly on the importance of Russian traditions and the necessity to defend them from Western interference. From the literature review, a correlation is evident between the need to increase the birth rate, marriages and reproduction while banning sex education. Mizulina’s aim to discourage any kind of information that might lead teenagers to pursue different life paths and sex education might be an example of this tendency (Shiryayev, 2018).

Fear of the “Spread of a gender discourse” in Russia is particularly evident in Mizulina’s arguments that have escalated when referring to the rights of the LGBT community. Besides, she has a rigid stance on gender roles and considers feminism as a Western tendency to limit and for this reason, is afraid that sex education could increase discussions on these topics. Astakhov’s arguments rely in particular on contrasting homosexuality and on reaffirming that in Russia heterosexuality is the only expected orientation. Sex education understood as CSE would therefore corrupt children and because of that parents have a primary role in explaining why non-traditional families are wrong.

“Unfitness of teachers in Russia” is not so much of a concern in itself for Mizulina, rather than an additional argument for explaining why only parents can give their children information on sexuality, if strictly needed. Astakhov is concerned about unfitness of teachers in schools, but this is more a worry about allowing specialists to talk to children rather than a reason to prohibit sex education.

Debates about the “right age” to teach sex education are taken up by both the politicians but especially by Mizulina, who argues that minors should not be involved at all in similar discussions and that only parents can provide some information, if necessary. Astakhov states that adults should follow courses on sex education to understand the meaning of “sexual abuse” and proposes to allow children aged 15-16 to get some information in line with an AO approach. To this end he suggests the reintroduction of the Soviet course “Ethics and Psychology of Family Life” that has, according to him, a proven history of success.

References to Western theories were found only in one instance, that is when Astakhov proposed to take inspiration from established courses such as the American program “Education and abstinence” (P. Astakhov: *Luchsheye polovoye vospitaniye - eto russkaya literatura*, 2013).

The type of language employed by the politicians has a deep emotional impact, sometimes taking a single case and generalising it to spread fear that a particular incident might happen to everyone’s children. Slogans that can easily be understood and remembered are the preferred way to advocate against sex education. An example is Astakhov’s one about the usefulness of making young people read Russian literature as “... everything is there: about love and the relationship between the sexes” (Astakhov *lishil shkol'nikov prava na seksprosvet*, 2014). This argument was found, mostly in 2013, on 4 different media sources (Interfax, Vesti.ru, Gazeta.ru and Lenta.ru) and has also been translated in many international newspapers. This citation has been used intensively by the media as a headline on 1/3 of the most relevant articles about Astakhov. The fact that it is a surprising and unusual approach to educating people about sexuality has certainly played a role in its diffusion. It might exemplify Astakhov’s attempt to close the debate on sex education in the country by ridiculing the same idea of providing a course on the topic.

By interpreting Astakhov and Mizulina’s arguments, both politicians seem to be strongly against CSE. They claim children’s morale and mental health could be in danger when providing children with such information. This belief is completely in opposition to the principle of CSE, according to which sex education should begin in early childhood and be adapted to different ages and needs. The necessity to be married to start exploring one’s sexuality, supported especially by Astakhov, is a characteristic of AO education. Lastly, heterosexuality is presented by opponents of sex education in Russia as the only accepted orientation while CSE emphasises human rights values, including gender equality and identity, and sexual diversity (Comprehensive Sexuality Education, 2020). Mizulina seems to be completely against any kind of sex education, AO included. The way Astakhov talks instead, about reintroducing the Soviet course “Ethics and Psychology of Family Life”, points to an abstinence-only approach.

Conclusion

The aim of the thesis was to analyse the debate on sex education in Russia and arguments put forward by two opponents of sex education, Pavel Astakhov and Yelena Mizulina through a framing analysis. Preliminary research has been conducted and the frames of comprehensive sex education (CSE) and abstinence-only education (AO) identified and used to be able to understand where the politicians' arguments are positioned.

The most used frames by Astakhov are the disapproval of children's exposure to new, different attitudes, the interference in Russian traditions by the West and the spread of a gender discourse in Russia. In contrast, Mizulina focuses mainly on the idea that sex education should only be addressed by parents, and on the "right age" to start talking about it with young people. From the analysis it appears that Astakhov is entirely against CSE, while his proposal to continue the USSR's course on "Ethics and Psychology of Family Life" seems to point to an AO approach under certain conditions, for instance that students should be 15 years or older. Contrary to Astakhov, Mizulina tries to completely discourage sex education for school-aged children regardless of age. Particularly striking is the finding that Mizulina does not even point to an abstinence-only approach.

In the light of the results, it would certainly be useful to expand this research by looking at local sex education experiments like Tyumen's case and debates generated in society because of their introduction. Research focusing on whether Russian politicians borrow discursive strategies from the West and especially from the US to advocate against sex education should also be expanded. Moreover, in addition to issues strictly connected to sex education opponents, it might be extremely interesting to link the absence of sex education and discussions about healthy relationships and consent to the situation of domestic violence in Russia. The aim would be to understand whether the introduction of a proper sex education curriculum might help tackle this public health problem as claimed by researchers in the West and if so, how it should be structured considering Russia's cultural legacy (Raphael, 2015, p. 3).

Overall, these findings contribute to the field of studies of sex education in Russia, by identifying the most recurrent arguments against CSE and for certain types of AO. The findings of this thesis

will be useful for future research in other post-Soviet countries or geographical areas where a tendency to limit discussions about sexuality and to encourage the diffusion of traditional values and conservative discourses is present.

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